

A Routine Mission

by John Edward Armstrong



This is about Sam and me. But really about Sam. He and I were born in one of the many, ordinary small towns in the Midwest. We grew up together — had the same teachers. We joined the Scouts and went to Scout Camp. We were big in high school plays, clubs, sports (proudly played together on two championship football teams — Sam was captain), sang together in a miserable quartet — all the usual stuff. We finished our college education at the same college, frequently getting together. When we served in different units in Europe during World War II, we managed to get together, finally, in Germany.

The story is as authentic as I can make it. I wasn't there. Sam was. Only recently, by mere chance and mainly by my asking a lot of questions, did I learn how Sam literally and matter-of-factly saved several lives. Like very few others I know, he's a bit reticent in talking about his army exploits, particularly in the war. I just about had to drag it out of him.

When President Roosevelt called most of the National Guard into active service in October 1940, Sam was "mobilized" with his local Guard unit. The call was announced to be for one year of active duty. As yet there was no war, and the draft had hardly gotten underway. Although far from pleased with this unceremonious uprooting, Sam took it pretty much in stride. Many of the National Guardsmen who were called to duty at that time did not take it so calmly. In fact, they took it quite personally. As the year wore on, com-

plaints from the troops reached an all-time high and morale reached an all-time low. A saying current in the Guard in the summer of 1941 was "O.H.I.O" which meant "Over the Hill in October." Put more in context, it meant that their one-year hitch would be completed, and they could return to their "normal" lives.

O.H.I.O. soon became moot. December 7, 1941, the "day that will live in infamy," was just around the corner.

Early in 1942, Sam was transferred as an officer candidate to the Field Artillery School at Fort Sill, Oklahoma. In June 1942, he was commissioned a second lieutenant and ordered to report to the 93d Armored Field Artillery Battalion at Camp Chaffee, Arkansas. Later that year, the 93d was relieved from its parent division, the 6th Armored, and in January 1943 assigned to the Field Artillery School as school troops. School troops provided the artillery fire training for officer candidates. It was an elite assignment because the training was invaluable. In the performance of school requirements, a great deal of firing was done and service battery was not excluded; all personnel developed into fast and accurate gunners.

Sam was married in the post chapel of Fort Sill in June 1943, and I was honored to attend as best man.

In September 1943, the 93d arrived in North Africa. The battalion won five Battle Participation Bronze Stars for combat achievements in campaigns in Naples-Foggia, Rome-Arno, Southern

France, Rhineland, Ardennes-Alsace and Central Europe. They got tough assignments because of their well-deserved reputation for combat competence. Also, their status was unusual — the 93d was one of few unattached armored field artillery battalions in the U.S. Army.

The event I've been leading up to took place in Germany in early April 1945, maybe the 9th or 10th. Some

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might think that since this date was getting close to May 8th, the date usually given as VE (Victory in Europe) Day, that there would have been little organized or significant enemy resistance. That would be far from accurate. Clashes with stubborn SS panzergrenadiers were growing more widespread at this time. American attempts to seize tiny bridgeheads over seemingly insignificant rivers were met with uncommonly ferocious resistance, including Tiger tanks, 88s, and Volkssturm units under revitalized German Army Corps

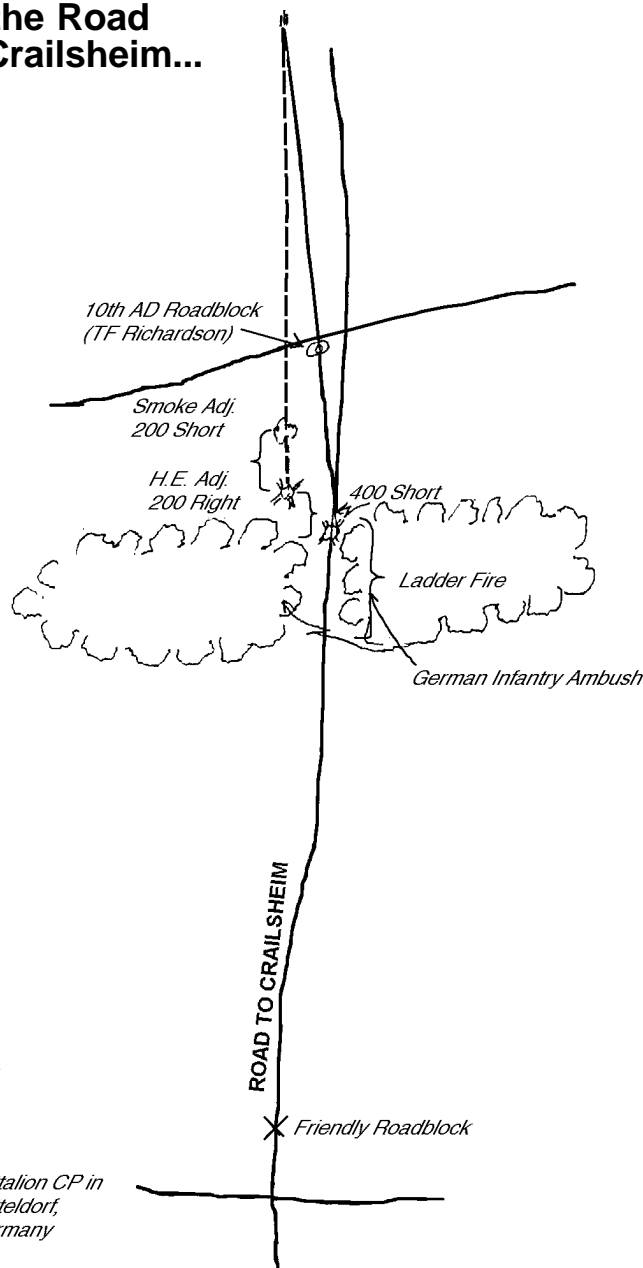
control. American armored units were moving so rapidly that the infantry couldn't keep pace. Pockets of Germans left behind made supply roads dangerous, and it was frequently as risky to go to the rear as to lead the point of attack.

As usual, Sam's armored artillery battalion was attached to an armored division or large regimental-sized unit. In this case it was the 10th Armored Division that had split into several task forces. Sam's unit was part of Task Force Richardson, named after its commander, a lieutenant colonel from 10th Armored. Their objective was Crailsheim, a small town on the Jagst River in southwest Germany. It is about 60 kilometers east of the wine city of Heilbronn and some 100 kilometers southeast of the university town of Heidelberg. The task force was approaching Crailsheim from the north. Sam's battalion had established its command post rather far forward in Satteldorf, a small town about four kilometers north of Crailsheim.

Sam's artillery career had included a variety of assignments and he had attained the rank of captain. He commanded the battalion's service battery and was also the battalion S4. His mission was to keep in close communication with the battalion headquarters as well as all the batteries of the battalion to see or anticipate what ammunition, rations, gasoline, and other supplies might be needed to keep up with the situation.

Sam and his jeep driver were on their way to make a routine check on these matters at battalion headquarters. They were proceeding south on the main road to Crailsheim when they came upon a roadblock maintained by a medium tank company of the 10th Armored. Sam dismounted to find out what was going on. He heard the company commander telling a sergeant that he had just been down the road some 600 yards south and that his jeep had been attacked by bazooka and small arms fire from the woods on both sides of the road. The captain, looking pretty excited, said that he and his driver narrowly escaped. Then the captain told the sergeant that his mission was to clear this road with his tank machine

On the Road To Crailsheim...



gun. The sergeant protested that this would be sheer suicide because of the cover afforded the enemy by the woods. Sam managed to ease his way up to the side of the tank captain. Although there was no doubt in his mind that he was capable of delivering the artillery support the tankers needed, he intervened almost tentatively, saying, "If you want, I can put some artillery fire on those woods."

The tankers didn't know who Sam was, or what unit he was from, except they assumed he was part of Task Force Richardson. For a long moment nobody

said anything. The tankers, acting puzzled, just stood there staring at this mild-mannered, boyish-looking artillery officer whose serious brown eyes were squinting steadily at them.

The tank captain was probably pondering if it was worth taking a chance on this hotshot artillery kid who might accidentally succeed in having a couple rounds dropped right where nobody would want them — on their own position. Instead, with a touch of Patton bravado, he said to Sam, "Sure, Captain, give us your best shot!"

At right, the destruction at Crailsheim after the battle in April, 1945.



2LT Herbert Samuel Roth
Fort Chaffee, Arkansas, 1942

Sam got on the radio in the sergeant's tank. To prevent his fire falling on friendly troops who might be attempting to use the road from the south, he called in an order for a roadblock. He then described the enemy ambush situation with grid coordinates from his map and called for artillery fire. In almost no time, the rounds were "on their way" and whistling over the heads of the startled tankers. Sam's adjustment was by a single gun. He observed that the initial "smoke" round had landed exactly as ordered, that is, 200 yards short of the target. The next two rounds were high explosive and were also as ordered, 200 yards right, then 400 yards short. He then ordered "fire for effect" and a six-gun artillery battery began pounding the targeted woods with "ladder fire," a rolling barrage. ["Not bad! Just like at Fort Sill!," Sam thought to himself].

The tankers, especially their captain, had watched all this with amazement. Never before had any of them seen first-hand how artillery fire could so quickly and effectively be called in to assist them — personally. They had seen many artillery barrages before but never one quite so made-to-order.

So, when this weird quirk of friendly fate began to dawn on these combat-hardened men, they looked at Sam as though he were a kind of magician. Especially appreciative and respectful was the expression on the face of the sergeant — the one who moments before was being ordered to take his tank down the road to clear those woods — where he was sure destructive fire awaited him and his men.

The enemy bazookas and small arms were silenced now. The road was



cleared again for friendly traffic. Sam wore a pretty big grin as he waved "so long" to the tankers and he and his driver went on with their mission. Their routine mission. There was nothing tremendously heroic about what Sam did that day, although the tank sergeant may have felt otherwise. Sam recognized a job to be done and he did it.

For him it was a routine mission — he was only too glad to be able to do it. While great acts of heroism easily capture our imagination, it's these small, **routine** acts that ultimately win our wars and deserve our admiration.

How appropriate it is that the motto of the 93d Armored Field Artillery Battalion is: SUSCEPTUM PERFICE MUNUS — "Perform the Mission at Hand"!

Sources

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